

Not The New Journalism

Our Troubled Press

Edited by James Boylan & Alfred Balk

(Little, Brown, \$10.00)

Vice President Agnew is not the only monitor of the nation's Press. Many members of the Press are themselves thoroughly committed to self-criticism, and for ten years the *Columbia Journalism Review* has been a place for the critical thoughts of moderate liberals to appear. Sometimes the results have been severe, with very specific accounts of newspaper deceptions and cover-ups (as with the Orangeburg shootings in 1968, or the inflated reports of yippie forces at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968), policy and news control (as in Wilmington and San Francisco papers), political favoritism (as in Indiana against McCarthy and Kennedy) and other forms of one-sided reporting. In the words of Elie Abel, who wrote the introduction to this anthology of 50 or so selections from the *Review*, the *Review* "has acquired a worldwide reputation for authority, courage and independence in media criticism."

Maybe so. The editors are certainly determined not to turn out a self-congratulatory trade journal. Furthermore, most of the criticism that dates back more than a year has the flavor of a suggestion box in which the suggestions have already been processed. This does not mean that what the *Review* says immediately breeds reform but that the journalistic community as a whole seems extraordinarily alive to its critics. In an editorial in 1969, for instance, the *Review* editors nominated the following "'institutional' stories as the ten least covered by American journalism: Congress, Department of Defense, the police, the courts, state legislatures, local government, medical care, education, industry, the media." Guessing wildly but as one thoroughly devoted to the game of finding out what game the press is playing at any given moment, I'd have to knock at least five of those off the list for 1971.

But having said this I can't take the next step in praise and say that the reforms proposed are significant. On the contrary the anthology seems to me, a relative outsider, to be in its essentials

old hat, and therefore rather depressing testimony to the ideological state of the profession. At least the liberal journalist mind - if the book is a reasonably accurate composite of what that mind thinks - seems to be stuck where it was when I was a schoolboy. For example, it still makes a big thing of not wanting to be hemmed in. By the DuPonts or Uncle Sam. By class or race or special interest. I don't mean to question our abiding American faith in the freedom of the Press, but I do think that intelligent contemporary discussions of that freedom (how to achieve it, and the virtues and dangers of achieving it, if one can) need to include at least some notice of what has happened to the notion of freedom in the Skinnerian, McLuhanized, Procter-and-Gamble Disneyland we have come to inhabit. I see no mention of this little difficulty in the book. *Our Troubled Press* is still back in Jefferson's parlor. No wonder it is troubled.

Immediately related to the freedom issue are the old journalistic war horses of detachment, objectivity, and fairness to all sides. Half the articles in the anthology contain instances of how the Press has been sucked or pushed hither and yon, together with discussions of how to avoid being sucked or pushed. Ben Bagdikian thus proposes what seems to be approaching common practice now (at least in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*) to "start a new journalistic form: the occasional full page with a skilled journalist writing clearly and fairly six or seven ideas of the most thoughtful experts on solutions of specific public problems... [so that the reader might] see a display of all the more interesting alternatives." Very good. But what is missing in his account is any attention to the subtler aspects of being sucked and pushed. As Gerald Grant, the author of the most provocative piece in the book, says: to understand what we are up against we have to understand the "most journalists bring to bear on events." These are what Bagdikian

assume that one can stand on a street corner or the White House lawn, see the news there objectively, and report on it rationally if only some villain with a sign on his chest saying Owner or Manipulator will leave one alone. This is what is old-fashioned.

Not that the models for this old-fashionedness are to be scorned. Aside from Jefferson and the other ancient heroes, there is A. J. Liebling whose "Wayward Press" column in *The New Yorker* remains one of the best things that ever happened to American journalism. Two years before his death Liebling contributed a book review to the *Review's* first issue (Fall, 1961) in which he ridiculed a journalist author for imagining that he could write objectively (or fully) about his boss. The author, John Chapman, had published a book-length account of his own newspaper, *The New York Daily News*, but had been unable to bring himself to mention that the paper was controlled by the *Chicago Tribune*. The connection is obviously crucial, Chapman's pussyfooting about it was comic, and to all the new-generation admirers of Liebling such a reporter discovery - of Chapman's omissions (for as Liebling put it "the omissions have greater potential interest than the inclusions") - points the way to the beginnings of journalistic wisdom.

It might be added that in this instance Liebling himself pussyfooted a bit about who controlled the *News*, by using double negatives and the like. In any event his influence is strong in the volume at hand; he was a model, usually, of hard-facts reporting, and suspicious of "soft" news: trends, fashions, climates of opinion. Yet it is with these fuzzy but undeniable presences that modern journalism must deal. The critics in this anthology do not want to deal with them.

Exception: an interesting brief piece by Mervin Block on how the Press suddenly went all out for Astrology. How could it be, asks Block, that something "denounced, discredited and declared dead by scientists for centuries" could suddenly be picked up like Miss America by the Press, which by so doing managed to give "respectability to the laughable, reinforce the credibility of the gullible, and earn the gratitude of the culpable?" Answer, from *Time's* managing editor (*Time* did a cover story): "I thought it was an interesting subject that had an unusual revival, especially among the young." Answer, from *Look*: "Simply